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**Title: Let them eat Shakespeare: prescribed authors and the National Curriculum**

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## **Let them eat Shakespeare: prescribed authors and the National Curriculum**

### **Abstract**

In this article, we examine the debate that surrounds prescribed reading lists in the English National Curriculum. In particular, we attempt to locate the role which ideas about heritage

and social and moral values have played in constructing this debate. We begin by examining the English National Curriculum's origin in the 1980s as a conservative exercise in stemming cultural crisis, and the discourse about literature's role in the curriculum which this helped construct. We then examine how this discourse has influenced, and continues to influence, the educational policy of prescribing a list of authors and consider the assumptions that are embedded in this policy. Finally, we reflect upon how the material conditions of the classroom provide a site of resistance, or difficulty, for the officially sanctioned discourse concerning literature's role in the curriculum.

**Key words:** canon; Cox Report; English teachers; National Curriculum; prescribed authors.

## Introduction

The new National Curriculum (launched on 12th July 2007 by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and due for implementation in September 2008) has been met with some conflicting views about both the nature and the significance of its reforms. On the one hand, the revised curriculum has been branded as a significant shift in UK educational policy. Its express commitment to a 'less prescriptive, more flexible framework for teaching', which will allow teachers to exercise creativity in their delivery of topics and 'tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of each individual student' (QCA 2007) has been characterised in some quarters as the biggest shake-up in secondary education for years (*The Independent* 2007), with some reports even suggesting that schools are being encouraged 'to tear up their timetables' in favour of radical new classroom practices (Lightfoot 2007). On the other hand, commentators have claimed that the reforms do not go far enough. Mary Bousted, for example, the ATL general secretary, argues that by hanging on to the teaching of discrete subjects, the QCA has missed the opportunity to overhaul the curriculum, making it hard for teachers to meet differing learning styles and needs (Bousted 2007). The source of these contradictory views can be uncovered in the QCA press releases that accompanied the new curriculum's launch. Here, we find a marked ambiguity. While stressing the radical nature of its reforms, the QCA simultaneously sought to reassure more conservative observers that its changes to the curriculum did not reflect 'some new-age obsession with making students feel good' (Boston 2007), nor a destruction of traditional teaching practices in favour of 'trendy' progressiveness and

a return to child centred learning.

The tensions played out at the launch of the new curriculum reflect a familiar theme: the issue of how to reconcile progress with tradition in order to provide educational developments that build on the best of the past. Amid the various debates that have surrounded the launch of the new National Curriculum, nowhere has the issue of past versus future been more sharply defined than in the case of literature. This is because attitudes towards literature's place in the curriculum accentuate how the ambition to provide an increased sense of flexibility, efficacy and practical purpose can be complicated by a tangle of other considerations. In this regard, literature, above all subjects, is a political matter (Jones 1992a). Firstly, literature has long been one of the subjects most hamstrung by government directives, with politicians on occasion ready to intercede over matters of content, and to legislate about what in the curriculum may or may 'not be touched' (*The Independent* 2007, also see Foden 2006). Secondly, there has also long been a reactionary quality among the press and public where literature is concerned. On these terms, literary works have become embroiled with the clarion call of 'standards', with booklists of what literature is being taught at any given time seen as providing a ready indicator for distinguishing between the maintenance of intellectual standards and signs of 'dumbing down'. Just such a discussion, indeed, accompanied the new curriculum's launch with extensive coverage of the 'heritage' novels on schools lists, and newspapers proclaiming the list of authors 'every teenager should read' (*The Independent* 2007). Literature's totemic place in the new curriculum was, furthermore, underlined, on these terms, by Ken Boston, Chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority during his launch speech and the interviews that followed. For Boston, literature provided a key point of reassurance for his audience that educational standards would be maintained. 'Books will still have to be read' he promised, and not just any books: the credibility of the new curriculum could be confirmed by noting that certain authors would still be prescribed (*The Independent* 2007). In reflecting upon how English literature is discussed in this way, we get a sense of the assumptions that are embedded about the discipline. The debate that dominates newspaper headlines continues to invoke a conception of literature bound-up in discussion of which authors are 'in' and which are 'out' (Woodward and Smithers 2006) and displacement of debate

surrounding efficacy, or the politics surrounding an issue such as how certain texts come to be prescribed in the first place. In this respect, the launch of the new National Curriculum underlines a view of literature not as a contested, and highly political field of knowledge which is the product of complex and contingent social processes and forces, but instead as an 'a-historical, a-social, non-power-laden category' (Kress 1995, 35).

In this article, we seek to unpick some of these matters by looking at the historical background to literature's inclusion in the National Curriculum and how this paved the way for a list of prescribed authors. We ask the question what is the mode of existence of literature teaching discourse, tracing the arguments surrounding literature through several of their incarnations leading to the present. In doing so, we examine the terms of debate via which literature is contested as a site of policy making, how its existence as a field of knowledge is complicated by assumptions about social and moral values and, perhaps most strikingly, how some key ideas about literature became enshrined in educational policy in spite of express recommendations to the contrary. We also explore the relationship between teachers, students and the 'canon' in order to question the value of prescribing authors for study in schools. Specifically, we enquire into the sense of efficacy that is held to reside in the choice of texts in the classroom and investigate the extent to which teachers' choice of texts balance pragmatism with a sense of responsibility to canonical and political considerations. In this regard, we aim to enhance understanding of the relationship between beliefs about literature enshrined within government policy and the practical implementation of this policy in the classroom.

### **Literature's journey into the National Curriculum**

The National Curriculum English Working Group was formally set up on 29th April 1988 to 'advise on attainment targets, programmes of study and associated assessment arrangements for English in the National Curriculum for the period of compulsory schooling' (Cox 1991, 4). The group, headed by Brian Cox, submitted its recommendations for the teaching of English in secondary schools in June 1989 (the Cox Report), and, after slight amendment, these recommendations were implemented

in 1990. Within the new mandatory programme of education, teachers in England and Wales were, for the first time, required to adopt a national, prescribed course for the instruction and evaluation of English. This was heralded as a new dawn in education which ‘should bring about revolutionary changes in the schools, and indeed have some influence on our national character’ (Cox 1991, 152).

Although, at the time, apparently unprecedented, the Cox Report, in fact, represented the culmination of decades of disputation about both the educational role that literature might fulfil and the constituencies at whom it should be directed. In the 1950s, a distinction had been enshrined between grammar schools, which included literature in their programmes of study, and secondary moderns, which utilised primers to enable pupils to develop practical language and literacy skills (Medway 1990). In the 1960s, the advent of comprehensive schools ended the segregation of the ‘philosophers’ and the ‘labourers’, and literary education was extended to all children. In this era, teachers were left to decide for themselves how English literature should be taught in the blended classroom (Jones 2003) as under the influence of developments in psychology, sociology and linguistics, child-centred learning and the idea of the self-actualisation of the student held precedence over the idea of literature as a channel for culture. However, by the mid 1970s concerns over ‘trendy’ teaching methods began to foster debate about national standards. This was fuelled by a series of cause celebre such as the William Tyndale Junior School Affair of 1974-76, in which much capital was made of the fact that the school was run as a co-operative (see Davis 2002, and Woodward 2001) and that William Tyndale’s head teacher Terry Ellis pursued a policy of non-compliance, reportedly exclaiming that his school “‘did not give a damn about parents’” (Woodward 2001). This, coupled with a decline in the UK economy, created a general sense that standards were slipping. From 1969 to 1977, the *Black Papers*, edited by academics Brian Cox and AE Dyson, conducted a campaign against the standards and behaviour in the comprehensive schools with particular reference to the decline in the teaching of English language and literature. The traditional belief that the government should not interfere with the curriculum of state schools came under pressure until eventually, in 1976, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan proposed a ‘core curriculum of basic knowledge’ and ‘a proper national standard of performance’

(Callaghan 1976 in Woodward 2001). The Conservatives, under Margaret Thatcher, developed Callaghan's educational ideas, with the *Black Papers* providing an intellectual basis for Thatcherite views on education and the arts. Under Thatcherism, progressivism was conflated with the decline of traditional values, the erosion of national identity, and the fall in national productivity. The suspicion that 'dangerous, politically motivated teachers' had taken control of the comprehensive schools (Ball et al 1990, 64) eventually led Thatcher's Conservative government to seek to wrest control of the curriculum. The editor of the *Black Papers*, Brian Cox, was thus duly invited in 1989 to draft a National Curriculum for English that would place literature at the heart of the curriculum.

From the outset then, literature's journey into the National Curriculum was bound-up with concerns over the nation's moral and social welfare. The Cox Report, while acknowledging literature's capacity to develop pupils' practical language and literacy skills, responded to this by casting literature primarily as a remedy for malaise and a bulwark against a cultural drift downmarket (Cox 1995, 181). Indeed, one of the larger themes of the Cox Report is embroiled with a sense of faith in the transforming power of culture or *paideia* (Jaegar 1986). In this respect, the Cox Report looks both inward at the potential of literature to develop the individual child, and outward at literature's potential to pass on the culture from one generation to the next, and critically understand of what culture consists (Cox 1991, 22). In the following sections of this article, we look at the history of the ideas about literature that are embedded in the Cox Report, and consider the salience of such ideas for modern curriculum making. We then consider how these theories about literature influenced the government's decision to issue a list of prescribed authors in 1993, and how these theories continue to inform educational policy today.

### **The Cox Report and the mode of existence of literature discourse**

On the face of it, the Cox Report argues against prescribing authors for use in schools, setting its store by the argument that teachers are better placed than government officials to understand the particular needs of their pupils and to cater to these needs through the selection of texts (Cox 1991). For the Cox Report, adopting this



position is, if nothing else, a matter of good sense:

If a list of set books had been included in the Statutory Orders, it is easy to imagine how after ten or so years teachers would be desperately trying to change it, with old-fashioned Members of Parliament resisting in lively debates. (Cox 1991, 69)

The rhetoric here is, though, misleading. Although apparently rejecting a preferred list of authors, the Cox Report nevertheless presents an attitude towards literature that leads inexorably back to just such a list. This is because the discourse of literature teaching established in the Cox Report is founded on a conservative, and 'common sense' conception. Literature teaching is constructed as an activity that should celebrate the best in culture, in which you simply cannot get away from the fact that some texts are better than others (Cox 1995, 181). The Cox Report thus 'outlines a model of reading which keeps in place the reader's humble relationship to "great literature"' (Jones 1992, 16). As Robert Owens argues, 'We are advised to expose ourselves to [literature], revere it, learn timeless human truths from it' (Owens 1992, 101). Furthermore, the Cox Report provides a framework for selecting the most appropriate texts. These are the texts that 1) might morally improve us 2) contribute to our sense of cultural heritage and 3) help us to construct a common culture (cf. Cox 1991, 70-78). The Cox Report, thus, not only argues that literature is *good for you*, it also embeds certain assumptions about just what it is that constitutes *good* literature. To establish its perspective securely, the Cox Report, furthermore, consistently relativises literary theories that challenge its views about the purpose and value of texts:

I cannot deny that the literature chapter takes for granted major assumptions about the value of great literature in the curriculum, and does not engage with the many recent books which have challenged this belief. (Cox 1991, 70)

In the Cox Report we repeated the belief of many teachers of English that the study of literature does foster intelligence and sensibility, as Leavis so passionately argued. We were not

convinced by the arguments to the contrary. (Cox 1991, 75)

As the reference to Leavis here suggests, in presenting this view the Cox Report aligns itself with the literary perspective developed in the Victorian and post Victorian era among some of English literature's most celebrated writers: writers for whom the teaching of literature is both a site of opportunity and responsibility, who collectively establish a view of literature as an entity with the power to cultivate minds and civilise society. In this respect, we can, for instance, discern the influence of George Eliot and her view that the writer 'inevitably assumes the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind' (Eliot, 1879/1973, 94); of Mathew Arnold (1882/2006) and his mission to Hellenise the philistine English middle classes via romantic and humanist principles; and, as noted, of F.R. Leavis (1948) and his merging of Eliot's moralism with Arnold's sense of social vision to argue that great novelists express 'a marked moral sensitivity' that may be transmitted to their readers (Leavis 1948, 9) and thus contribute to their well being and sense of self. Just as these views can be seen to exert a powerful influence on the fashion of English criticism for most of the twentieth century, so they can be seen to clearly underpin the attitude we find in the Cox Report.

### **Literature and moral improvement**

Firstly, for the Cox Report literature is a phenomenon with the power to act as an automatic moral instructor. The argument for literature's ability to contribute to moral welfare can be found in more and less extreme guises across the twentieth century and has drifted in and out of focus for curriculum makers over recent decades. For a detailed, contemporary account of this argument we can, though, look to professor of ethics and character education, Karen Bohlin (2005). According to Bohlin, the development of National Curriculum Citizenship in the UK and concerns over rising levels of school violence in the USA have made literature's ability to contribute to moral welfare 'once again a hot topic' (Bohlin 2005, 1). Her view is persuasive in that we can certainly find a range of arguments currently propagated about literature's role in society and its importance for moral education - see for example the QCA's (2008) recommendations for the use of literature to assist pupils' personal development in response to *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003). Under Bohlin's account, great literature

provides ‘a window to the soul, through which we can examine the internal and external factors involved in becoming or failing to become the kind of person we admire or respect’ (Bohlin 2005, 24). According to Bohlin, ‘good novelists are not only good storytellers, but also great psychological portrait painters’ (Bohlin 2005, 18) and texts enable teachers to ‘give students the practice they need to become connoisseurs of vicarious experience’ (Bohlin 2005, 31) and thereby practice moral judgement. In their most extreme form, Bohlin's arguments occasionally even propose a linear relationship between the *proper* use of literature and social cohesion. In this regard, it is instructive to note that Bohlin sees literature as a particularly vital source of character education - or of what she terms the ‘*schooling of desire*’ (Bohlin 2005, 18) for pupils from deprived backgrounds. By studying ‘great literature’, Bohlin argues, deprived pupils not only imbibe morality, they develop a new engagement with life: ‘the analysis of morally pivotal points in the lives of characters in literature helps to illuminate an individual’s “reason to be happy”’ (Bohlin 2005, 178). Though this perspective may seem rather zealous it is by no means unusual. A related view has also recently been endorsed by John Carey (2005) who argues strongly for literature's efficacy when used as a source of moral education. For Carey, faith that literature alters thought and behaviour is confirmed by a recent project undertaken at Deerpark young offenders’ institution in Durham, in which several young offenders studied William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. The young offenders’ responses to the experience are cited by Carey in validation of his argument. He notes, for instance, that one of them, who had been imprisoned for robbing a taxi driver, claimed that ‘the book had made him think about civilization, and how it would collapse into chaos without law, and had even made it easier for him to accept being sent to prison for what he did’ (Carey 2005, 211). Citing this study, Carey concludes that literature provides a source of moral development and personal contentment and that ‘once [literature’s] words are lodged in your mind they are indistinguishable from the way you think’ (Carey 2005, 245). Though there is a range of emphasis in how literature is depicted as a source of moral education, under all accounts, one theme is consistent: literature is a means of forming citizens and creating social stability.

### **Literature, national identity and the common culture**

While the Cox Report draws attention to the personal benefits to be gained through the study of literature, it also highlights literature's potential to bind individuals into a society through the creation of a common culture. This argument, like the moral argument, may be traced to the nineteenth century, when, once again, figures such as Arnold (1882/2006) advocated culture as a means to homogenise a nation divided along class lines. Perhaps the most influential exponent of this view, as Robert Eaglestone (2000) notes, is T.S. Eliot. Eliot's essays of literary criticism, written during the 1920s, argue that the living tradition of great Western literature is part of who we (British people) are (Eaglestone 2000, 55). Furthermore, for Eliot, people must 'genetically' share idea of the canon, and the 'universal' Western European values that underlie it, 'in their bones', as it is only through absorption in the great artefacts of Western literature that people are able to access, and own, the culture of which they are a part and thereafter to contribute to its future (Eaglestone 2000, 55). For Eliot, the canon is thus the means of sustaining and transmitting not only *our* culture but ourselves (cf. Eaglestone 2000, 55). A response to T.S. Eliot's attitude towards the canon is evident in the Cox Report, where literary education is cast not only as a bridge across class divisions, but as a means of homogenising children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The texts that have helped shape the way British people think and speak, we are told, will provide *all* children with a 'common range of reference' (Cox 1991, 71) and thereby enable them, regardless of their ethnic origin, both to understand and contribute to the future of British culture.

Closely related to, yet distinguishable from, the argument that literature enables pupils to access and contribute to a common culture is the argument that literature fosters a sense of national identity. This view sees literature as a system of culture that embodies public sentiment about 'country' by providing a shared stock of images, ideas, stories and traditions, all of which go together to help each of us imagine and so identify ourselves as (for example) English (Eaglestone 2000, 104-105). As such, literature is held to provide a point of stability by offering a reference point against which people might orientate themselves, develop a sense of their own identity, and eventually a means by which they might imagine themselves to be part of a wider process – in Benedict Anderson's language - moving through history. In this argument, culture

homogenises children of different classes and races by contrasting the unified ‘us’ with an external ‘other’ (Meek 2001, ix). Though foregrounding cultural difference, this argument makes light of any suggestion of xenophobia by casting national literatures as a source of benevolence towards other cultures. The celebration of local, domestic history and distinctive features become the nation's ‘contribution to the cultural diversity of the world’ (Gundem 1996, 62).

The Cox Report endorses the notion of text as store house of national identity, claiming ‘At the level of whole societies, written language serves the functions of record-keeping and storing both information and literary works’ (Cox 1991, 140). This is also affirmed in the Cox Report by the discourse that is established around multicultural texts. Though it endorses the teaching of multicultural texts, it does so offering them as a foil to British heritage texts in order to consolidate, rather than challenge, a sense of British identity. Thus such texts are seen, not only, as a source of developing ‘a broader range of thought and feeling’, but also as a site of difference from which pupils will ‘gain a better understanding of the cultural heritage of English literature itself’ (Cox 1991, 73), thus keeping intact the privileged ‘us’ of heritage texts over the ‘other’ of multicultural texts.

### **Prescribed authors in the National Curriculum**

The Cox Report, then, implies that the ‘right’ sort of literature fosters ‘intelligence and sensibility’ (Cox 1991, 75), develops students’ moral judgement, social engagement and national identity and conversely that the ‘wrong’ sort of literature (the type George Eliot dubs ‘spiritual gin’ (Eliot, 1879/1973, 94)), blunts intelligence and moral reasoning. This perspective, bound up as it is with the Victorian view of literature, has exerted a powerful influence on educational policy for the last two decades. Notably, it provided the terms of discourse that led to the institution of a government approved prescribed list of authors in 1993. Thus, from its inception the National Curriculum set its store by a large number of British authors. Thereafter, under successive governments, the English curriculum has become increasingly prescriptive and increasingly entrenched the association between literature, moral reasoning and national identity. The revisions to the curriculum in 1995, although according to Kress

little more than general tidying up (cf. Kress et al 2005), continued in this vein. In 1999, the curriculum's incorporation of citizenship from 2002 (DfEE 1999) consolidated this association further. Once again, there was a move to draw a distinction between Britain's rich cultural heritage and multicultural, 'popular' writing, and thus a weighting of the curriculum in favour of traditional British writers. Over the last few years, this perspective has been given further urgency by concerns about social fragmentation bound up with youth crime, debate over immigration, the UK's place in the European Union and threats from home-grown Islamic terrorism. In light of this, literature has been regularly posited as a site that might 'play a key role in creating community cohesion' (BBC 2007a). Since 2006, Education Secretary Alan Johnson has brought to bear a particularly fundamentalist perspective on this issue. In a direct echo of the Victorian position, he has consistently proposed a correlation between doing more to strengthen the curriculum and promoting 'British values' of tolerance and respect (Sylvester and Thomson, 2007).

Johnson's impact has been dramatic, not least because his tenure as Education Secretary has coincided with a number of initiatives that promised to push educational policy in a more progressive direction. Instead, Johnson has presided over a series of regressions, illustrated most recently by the English 21 debacle. English 21 had been launched in 2004 as a 'national conversation' about 'how English should be taught' in schools (National Literacy Trust 2008). The English 21 'conversation' involved 5,000 teachers, parents, pupils, employers, employees, writers, literary organisations, local authorities and others (QCA, 2005). English 21 considered what 'heritage' means in our multi-ethnic, multicultural society (Willetts 2007) and, in light of this, what kind of curriculum might need to be fostered for the future. Among the conclusions of English 21 were that literary heritage should not be seen as a static and fixed list of texts, and that literary heritage must be constantly revised to include texts from diverse traditions (QCA 2005, 8). Following this, the QCA recommended that texts should not be prescribed (with the exception of Shakespeare) in its new draft KS3 English curriculum, simply stating that pupils should be taught stories, poetry and drama from before, during and after the twentieth century (National Literacy Trust 2008).

However, although the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority recommended

removing the list of prescribed authors, in 2006 Johnson overruled this decision and announced that authors including Trollope, Dickens and Austen, would be a feature of the curriculum for 11–14 year olds (National Literacy Trust 2008). In conjunction with this, in an act of extraordinarily constrained thinking, he argued that ‘there were certain untouchable elements of the secondary school curriculum that all teenagers should learn for a classic well-rounded British education’ (Johnson in Garner 2007). Thus, the new National Curriculum in 2007 was for Johnson, a curriculum in which there was a synoptic link between protecting ‘the classic canon of literature’ and meeting the challenges of a ‘rapidly changing world’ (Johnson in *BBC* 2007b).

Johnson's roughshod treatment of less conservative perspectives than his own did not go unchallenged. Sir Mike Tomlinson, a former schools chief inspector and QCA board member, described the U-turn over prescribed texts as 'very sad' (Tomlinson in Brettingham 2007). Simon Gibbons, chair of the relevant committee at the National Association for the Teaching of English, said the idea of giving 'huge weighty tomes to key stage 3 pupils' was a 'nonsense' and that the list smacked of superficiality: 'it reads like a desert island discs of the Labour Cabinet' (Gibbons in Brettingham 2007). Others were more curt. Ian McNeilly of the national association for the teaching of English, for example, branded Johnson a 'bird brain' (McNeilly in *BBC* 2007c). Following this backlash, teachers widely campaigned for non-compliance claiming that they would ignore the instruction to teach Dickens and Austen to key stage 3 pupils or get round the diktat by using textual extracts (Marshall in Brettingham 2007). The perversity of Johnson's new list was made most explicit by Ian Brinton, chair of the English Association's secondary committee, who noted that less than a third of the listed authors, including Austen and Eliot, had ever previously been taught before year 9 (Brinton in Brettingham 2007).

It is instructive here to reflect upon the manner in which Johnson himself appears to have been interpellated by British culture, as Johnson's regard for the shibboleths of British literature runs parallel with a nostalgia for the British class system. Reviewing a recent interview, we see Johnson's simultaneous pride in drawing attention to his working-class past (which involved leaving school at 15, working as a postman and bringing up three children on a council estate) and in championing the achievements of

ruling class culture. As such, Johnson, not only holds in tension the contradictions of 'New' Labour, he also embodies the process, and logic, via which those who apparently oppose hegemony can, in fact, enforce it. Stressing his working-class credentials and celebrating the past triumphs of the middle-class are equally important for Johnson because both these things ultimately validate his own subjectivity. Via the history he has lived, and been a part, he is able to celebrate his own place in the grand scheme of things. This is all very well for Johnson. Alarming, however, when applied to the educational context, this perspective leads to proposing the solution to problems of under-privilege and deprivation, not by fostering democracy, but by more widely circulating ruling-class culture so that all children are absorbed into its traditions. As an instance of this, we might note how Johnson argues for the manner in which education might provide the means of throwing off the 'shackles' of disadvantage: 'It's not that too many middle-class parents are giving their children ballet and music lessons, I want poor children to have the same' (Sylvester and Thomson 2007).

### **Concerns about prescribed texts**

The policy decisions of recent governments although consistent have, then, been based on a very partisan attitude. The discourse is underpinned by hegemony, essentialism and ethnocentricity. Furthermore, the hegemonic logic has become bound-up with a discourse of common sense and assumptions about literature's moral power that mask some of its more troubling implications. In the following sections of this article, we turn our attention to concerns about the implications of prescribing authors. We also draw upon evidence from the classroom to explore the consequence of using literature for moral and social purposes. On this topic, it is instructive to begin the next section of this article by returning to the views of the chairman of the Cox Report panel, Brian Cox, and to note that he has become one of the most vocal critics of the government's canon in recent years. In 1995, for instance, noting what he considered to be the distortion and misuse of the Cox Report's recommendations, Cox charged that the National Curriculum had been taken over by 'a small right-wing pressure group' (Cox 1995, 23) and that decisions, such as the inclusion of a large number of British authors in the revised curriculum at the expense of multicultural texts, were based on a racist 'distrust of non-white writers' (Cox 1995, 94). In addition to this, he went on to



condemn the use of literature to 'impose a national state identity on children' (Cox 1995, 180) and argued instead for a more democratic approach in which teachers would 'choose representative texts for study in the classroom which reflect a whole range of cultures, classes, languages and genders' (Cox 1995, 180) and thereby allow ethnic and class self-expression.

Although Cox does not propose any radical challenge to the government's policy, his perspective is a useful point of departure, as from it we might move to further problematise the government approved discourse. In this respect, we might note how it is a commonplace in contemporary literary theory to position literature as a culturally situated practice *constructed* through the historical activity of reading and writing. In addition, we might then turn to consider how literary value, itself, is often understood to be a construct rather than an objective category which will only tell us what 'is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes' (Eagleton 1996, 10). Under this perspective, the belief system of the interpreter is central to meaning-making and indeed this belief system itself might be considered little more than a reflection of the perceived values and norms of a given social context. Thus we are led not to a-historical and non-value laden judgements but instead to an acknowledgement of the contentious issue of the political interests with which literary texts may be said to collude. In light of such a critical perspective, we would now like to re-examine some of the arguments that underpin the prescription of authors.

Here, we can observe how the argument for the promotion of moral welfare or character education through literature (Bohlin 2005, 18), immediately takes on an uncomfortable tone, as the idea of being taught by great literature now slips into an argument for literature as a form of social engineering. Put crudely, literature becomes cast as a technology through which subjects may be programmed (Owens 1992, 107). The notion that we can use literature to form citizens and create stability, furthermore, allows social problems to be displaced from their most obvious terms of reference, that is, they can be cast as having their origin in cultural rather than economic factors. In this regard, arguing for the moral benefits that result from exposure to certain types of literature might be seen as part of an exercise with hegemonic intent, where the

normalisation of middle-class taste stands in for confronting social and economic inequity. The danger here is made explicit by returning to Bohlin, who argues that exposure to good literature is of particular benefit for pupils from deprived backgrounds:

Sociology has demonstrated this truth time and time again; the experience of a child born into extreme poverty and neglect seriously limits his or her ability to develop virtuous dispositions. (Bohlin 2005, 33)

Similar problems also emerge with arguments for using literature to promote national identity and social cohesion. Here, we might reflect that the term ‘national’ has its origins in Europe no earlier than the nineteenth century,’ (Meek 2001, viii), that there is no definable ‘essence’ to nationality (Eagleton 2000, 104), and that the term national identity is therefore, at best, an unstable construct. National identity, indeed, only comes into being by being worked at to establish a sense of who *we* are as a people, distinct from other people around the world. Following through the logic of this, a system of national literature is also revealed as a construct determined by usage and given authority through repetition, with the canonisation of certain works and the hierarchy established around these works only reinforced through the circulation of historical accounts of texts in given social contexts. There is thus a large element of self-fulfilling prophecy about the argument for literature and national identity. As Homi Bhabha (1990) identifies, while written language may support and transmit culture, this act of transmission perpetuates and ultimately forms the culture itself. By stating, for example, that Shakespeare has contributed to British culture and treating his works as cultural artefacts, people with cultural authority both affirm their authority to know what is of cultural value and *make* what they value the nation’s culture. Texts that are used to promote national identity are thus credited, in a circular process, with a cultural importance that appears to be confirmed by their enduring social relevance. The image of cultural authority thus composes its own powerful image (cf. Bhabha 1990, 3), and is given authority not because of its authentic quality but because it is readily bound up with a national myth.

### **The classroom**

The idea of great literature as a source of moral welfare and social cohesion might be imagined to meet with some redress in the classroom where theoretical considerations regarding notions of the canon must be reconciled with actual circumstance. Here, however, the attitude towards a prescribed list of authors is, itself, often bound up with pragmatism. Children, after all, the argument goes, cannot possibly study *all* literature, and 'something' therefore must be taught (Kermode, 1988). On these terms, Fleming (2007) argues 'there is a natural tendency amongst teachers to develop a set of recognised texts irrespective of whether these are dictated externally' (Fleming 2007, 32) and therefore that in the absence of an officially sanctioned canon, a *de facto* canon will emerge determined by factors such as availability, local fashion, teacher preference and, even, deference to authority. Under this view, canon formation is presented as a 'natural human instinct' via which order is imposed upon variety by choosing 'what is best for preservation over time' (Fleming 2007, 34). From this view, a strong argument might be made that 'canon formation should happen in a . . . systematic way' (Fleming 2007, 34) and against the kind of relativism that the absence of a canon produces. The alternative to the canon, after all, appears to present inherent difficulties. On the one hand, it presents problems with standards and equivalence between classrooms and, on the other, it renders literature an open-ended category amid which teachers are faced with unrealistic choices, regress or inertia. A pragmatic view also allows the logic of those who argue against the canon to be folded back upon itself: as we note that even if substituting one set of books for another, whatever is displaced will be simply replaced by an alternative which will invariably reflect someone's interests (Kermode, 1988).

For teachers, pragmatism is though, of course, not the whole story. More complex considerations are in play and here we might observe the tension between those who through their practice embody the government approved discourse and those who resist it. In this respect, first of all, we find the official discourse which binds together ideas about literature, moral welfare and social cohesion certainly has its advocates. In their study of English in the urban classroom, for example, Kress et al (2005, 7) found that teachers in a school 'situated in an area with a significant Black population that is characterised by social deprivation' welcomed the teaching of canonical authors such

as Shakespeare as part of their pupils' democratic entitlement. Conflating the term 'the best' with the mantra of equal opportunities, they expressed the opinion that working-class and black students have 'a right of access' to certain literature because it is deemed to hold cultural capital (Kress et al 2005, 153). On these terms, we find the government's hegemonic view of literature ironically given urgency by notions of egalitarianism, with some teachers even making the circular argument that schools have a responsibility to introduce young people to the writing which is considered particularly worthy of study without any apparent acknowledgement of the false logic, or the contentiousness, that this view invokes (Kress et al 2005, 150).

For the counter view, we can though turn to the many teachers for whom there is unease about fostering a deferential relationship to literary texts. Such teachers express a wariness of privileging the socially and historically determined curricula and institutional practices of western middle-class culture; and sense in the material conditions of the classroom an opportunity to foster alternative practices and politics (cf. Ward 2006). These teachers position learning as a social process based upon encounter between the experiences of pupils and curricula and seek opportunities to harness the pupils' subjectivity and personal experience as a means of interrogating cultural formations. Under such approaches, social concerns eclipse textual authority and the act of reading is privileged over the literary artefact. These teachers thus might seek to generate debate that interrogates the subject position and political interests fostered by a given text, or seek to engage students' interest in moral dilemmas and social practices with literature providing 'a springboard to classroom discussion' (Ward 2006, 42). Alternatively, this process may be reversed so that a text is employed retrospectively as an adjunct to pedagogy or means of illuminating an issue. As Williams identifies this is an approach which has increasing currency:

In the past, I have taught *Pride and Prejudice* to a GCSE class. We used class time to discuss the position of women in society, class differences in Austen's time and the significance of marriage. Now, I am encouraged to start with the issues I wish to cover and work back to find appropriate texts. The difference is subtle but significant. English changes from being about the immersion in a great literary work that may or may not raise interesting

points for discussion to a lesson on values and issues in which literary examples are mere illustrations. (Williams 2005)

In the classroom, such teachers use texts critically in practice with their approaches reflecting the view that texts should be interrogated rather than simply read out of respect for their place in literary history. Alternatively, these teachers might foreground the social aspects of texts, or even abandon texts altogether if students' subject positions render these texts excessively complex or obscure (Ward 2006, 48).

The curriculum's focus on heritage texts and notions about social cohesion meet with similarly diverse practices in the classroom. Kress et al (2005), once again, show that there is support among some teachers for placing emphasis on British heritage texts. For these teachers, teaching British heritage texts is attractive, primarily, because doing so is less problematic than attempting to appeal to pupils' multiple and irreconcilable cultural experiences - a view that is once again validated by notions of egalitarianism and ideas about access for all (see Kress et al 2005). Other teachers, however, resist the notion of seeking to transmit heritage, arguing that doing so posits the classroom as a site outside of everyday experience where something *other*, rather than immediate, called *Englishness* is encountered and fostered (Kress et al 2005, 147). This casting of literature as a site of *difference* is, for many teachers, a cause for concern. Once again, as Ward (2006) demonstrates, these teachers reject the use of literature as a means of homogenising taste and developing national identity and are more at ease with a multicultural agenda. In this respect, they conceive of the classroom as a site of exchange rather than indoctrination.

The practices concerning how texts are used and/or read may appear to destabilise the idea of canonical authority. The material conditions of the classroom, whose transactions involve the interplay of ideology with local circumstance, might seem to offer a site of complexity and involve situation-specific practices that create the possibility of resistance. However, although these transactions may imply a challenge to the curriculum's socially and historically determined assumptions, as long as the National Curriculum is bound up with prescribed authors, they are instead turned to reaffirm its validity. In this regard, any critique of texts is absorbed by the curriculum

rather than recognised as a site of its dismantling, with the very act of engaging with the canon serving to pay homage to it and reaffirm its power. From this, we get a sense of the insidiousness of prescribed texts. Though the classroom may highlight the shortcomings of an ideologically imposed curriculum, the impact of prescribed authors is not destabilised by practice. The potential to conceive of tradition as a construct rather than truth, and shift emphasis from celebrating and perpetuating the past to analysing why and what is celebrated and perpetuated, is not necessarily accomplished.

### **Conclusion**

*'Control of the National Curriculum can lead to control of the way children think' (Cox 1995, 23).*

The idea of great literature as a source of moral welfare and social cohesion continues to exert a powerful influence on curriculum makers. Though we might imagine, or expect, the discourse concerning English literature to have become more complex in light of several decades of literary theory, this is not the case. Literary theory rather remains relativised in secondary education policy-making by being cast as oppositional to *great* literature rather than centrally engaged with its nature and effects. Perhaps this should present no surprise, as ideas about great literature are often conflated both with a discourse of common sense and/or the mantra of equal opportunities - the sleight of hand in a hegemonic system being run together with the idea of access for all going unnoticed. On this basis, the state control of education, begun in the 1980s, has continued to dominate English literature's place in schools with the Victorian view of literature providing the basis for the centralization of powers and the prescription of curriculum content.

We might take issue with this on a number of counts. First, we might note the insidiousness of how the version of the nation reflected in the National Curriculum is maintained by silencing many of the nation's constituent voices, or alternatively, as Ken Jones identifies, how though 'claiming its relevance to all students, it in fact neglects the specific conditions of their lives and the interests which motivate their learning' (Jones 1992, 127-128). On these terms, prescribed authors in the curriculum are a force that

acts against both democracy and the development of critical citizenship. Beyond this, we might take issue with the hegemony implicit in a view which proposes culture and its textual artefacts as a natural set of given traits, conditions and lineages, as such a view closes down the interrogation of how official knowledge is normalized and reproduced into the legitimate currency in everyday social life (cf. Grierson 2007, 540). In light of this, it is helpful to remind ourselves of some questions posed by Henry Giroux:

. . . how do we make education meaningful by making it critical, and how do we make it critical so as to make it emancipatory? (Giroux 1983, 3)

. . . [how do we appropriate] the critical impulse so as to lay bare the distinction between reality and the conditions that conceal its possibilities? (Giroux 1983, 242)

We might start by observing that the classroom must be a site that illuminates not only the value of literary traditions but also their limitations and thus makes possible and promotes continual engagement with other modes of experience. A move away from prescribed authors is essential to facilitating this and to the development of a classroom where, rather than pay homage to the dominant culture, a critical attitude towards forms of domination is instead fostered.

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